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Archives

Walking the Labyrinth
A Journey of Transformation

By Harriette Royer

" Life is full of journeys. Sometimes I feel lost and out of place. Sometimes no path is clear, and I have to walk by faith." - From the song, "I Will Follow"

It was summer, 1994. My job at the college was in jeopardy. My manager was making life miserable. In August, I planned a week's vacation at the Chautauqua Institution with the man in my life. He backed out a few days before; he said he didn't love me anymore. During the week, I sat along by the lake and poured my heart in a letter to my Mom. She must have read it because it was opened by her bed on Friday, the day she suddenly died.

Five months later, my Dad died.

On a beautiful day the following summer, my dear friend Wayne, sensitive to my grieving, called me with an invitation. "My Creation Spirituality group is going to walk two labyrinths in the area. Why don't you come with us? I think it will do you good." Trusting him, I went. It changed my life indelibly.

I can't explain what happened except that something profound shifted in me. The labyrinth penetrated my soul and seized me. For the next several months I read everything I could find about labyrinths (and there wasn't much). In February I flew to France to visit Chartres Cathedral and its labyrinth. In May I purchased one of the first canvas labyrinths created by Grace Cathedral, dedicated it to my Mom, and committed to being the steward of the labyrinth. In June, I taught my first labyrinth class at Chautauqua and every month since then, I have opened the labyrinth for the community to walk.

Looking back on my experience, I realzie that the labyrinth led me on a personal pilgrimage of discovering and clarifying my life purpose. How perfect! Thousands of years old, the labyrinth has been used by people around the globe as both a symbol and a vehicle for sacred journeys – pilgrimages. What is it about the labyrinth that inspires spiritual awakening? This question has fascinated me from the day I first walked it.

The idea of life being a journey is not new. Journeys that focus on discovering the deep purpose or meaning in one's life are embedded in every culture. In Native American tradition, it is a vision quest. Early Christians and Muslims made pilgrimages to their holy land. The Old Testament is filled with stories of transformative journeys, as is the life of Christ.

What Is A Labyrinth?

A labyrinth is an ancient geometric pattern, usually circular, formed of intertwined spirals with a single path leading to a center. The path in is also the path out. Despite the fact that they may look quite similar, a maze is very different. A maze is a puzzle with dead ends, false entrances, and tricks on the path. The experience of walking a labyrinth is distinctly different from walking a maze. Where a maze activates the problem-solving left bring, the labyrinth engages the intuitive, creative right side of the brain. The mystery of the labyrinth lies not in its physical structure but in its power to transform perception. As the foremost researches on labyrinths writes, "A walker leaving a labyrinth is not the same person who entered it, but has been born again into a new phase or level of existence."

What Is It About The Labyrinth That Shifts And Transforms Energy?

Over the years I have come to describe the labyrinth as an energy transformer. From my very first labyrinth walk, I experienced a transformative energy shift. Hundreds of labyrinth walkers echo the same experience. The secret may lie in the energy field created by walking its deceptively simple path.

The Walk Inward

You begin with the intention of opening to the experience. The act of crossing over the threshold into the circle, a shape honored as sacred by many traditions throughout the world, signals to your consciousness that you are entered sacred space. Your first steps on the path lead you onto a spiral. Following the path, you walk in and out, up and down, left and right. You never need to guess where you are going or plan your next step. The path is laid out before you. Yet you often feel disoriented. You cannot easily see where you are on the path. Even though you are clearly plodding toward the center, you must trust that you are making progress. As soon as you think you've figured out the pattern, you turn away and move in the opposite direction. You may despair that you will never get to the center. Finally you let go of figuring, surrender to the path, and follow, trusting and moving on faith. Your attention shifts. The labyrinth shows you how to let go of what the Buddhists call the "monkey mind" and penetrate the deep, intuitive realm of mind where connection to Self, Spirit and Universe occurs.

The Center

From the far rim of the circle, the path changes and takes you to the threshold of the Center – the Center of the center, the circle within the circle, another sacred symbol. The walk in allows you to shed thoughts, emotions, memories, histories that no longer serve you. The purging creates a vacuum for something new to enter. Stepping into the Center is like swimming into a womb. It is a place of deep peace and calm, the "place of no-thing where some thing happens," according to geomancer and labyrinth author Sig Lonegren. Many labyrinth walkers describe it as the place of Divine Love, complete harmony, and deep healing. People have told me of encounters in the Center with loved ones who have died; conversations with God, Angels, and Guides; gnosis – profound sense of knowing, inspiration, and Divine connections.

The Walk Out

Leaving the womb-like Center is like choosing to be born. The path out is the path of new creation. Whatever quickened and gestated in the Center forms and takes shape on the walk out. It is no accident that the path out retraces, step by step, the path in. Treading identical steps with new understanding changes your perceptual experience. It allows you to re-focus, re-align your energy, absorb your understanding into the cellular level, and choose other ways of being and knowing. These energetic transformations unfold with each step. By the time you reach the threshold of the path, you realize that something has shifted and changed. You may not know what has changed or be able to describe it in words, but you know you are not the same person who walked in.

The Gift Of The Labyrinth

With your intention, you can make your labyrinth walk sacred travel, a pilgrimage or quest for a spiritual awakening. As in all pilgrimages, when you walk the labyrinth as a sacred journey, everything that happens is meaningful; nothing is an accident. Notice your attention. Listen to your body, heart, mind and soul as you encounter others on the path. Your reactions to the other "pilgrims" on the path reveal meaningful insights to you. The memory that hits you on a particular path is significant. The irritating noise in the background carries another message, just as the physical discomfort you sense contains a lesson for you.

By placing your attention on your intention, you are a walking prayer, a commitment to transformation. Dive into the deep recesses of your awareness. Enter Mystery through this wondrous sacred container. Experience the sacred as balance, harmony, wholeness and connection to that which is greater than yourself. Each awareness or leap of consciousness carries you closer to the Divine Balance, that state of being knowledge, feeling, and action are in harmony, where what you say is exactly how you feel.

This is the gift of the Labyrinth.

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